

Anger to laughter and back again

By Brock Weir

We couldn't help but laugh when it came on the car radio.

Sitting in an underground parking garage in 2009 or so, it seemed unlikely that the 1934 instrumental version of the 1934 hit "Love in Bloom", written by the less-than-marquee names of Ralph Rainger and Leo Robin, would take up valuable broadcasting space on a prominent radio station at what I can only imagine was a prime slot during the end-of-day rush hour drive time.

But there it was.

The tune itself didn't immediately register until a familiar string of eight notes came in a few bars in, the simple notes that became the theme music for comedian Jack Benny throughout his venerable career - played off-key, of course, on his prized violin.

After hearing the Benny version of the song for so many years, it was almost as if our brains were attuned to his deliberately massacred rendition and, despite the song playing beautifully on the speakers, a couple of mild chuckles quickly rode a crescendo to laughter - a welcome release near the end of a particularly challenging day.

After a hospital stay of several months, it was time to help move my grandmother into long-term care.

Given her health circumstances at the time, it was an unfortunately inevitable step that had to be taken, but it was difficult nonetheless.

It is not to say that she was ill during the entirety of her hospital stay - don't get me wrong, the health challenges were real - but it was, for several weeks, the only option for her to receive the care she needed, albeit in a less-than-ideal location.

Finding a spot in long-term care was, as so many of you can appreciate, as Herculean a task as it is now, so we - and she - had to wait. A few options came and went, but luckily, at the eleventh hour, a space opened up not too far away - and then it was crunch time: figuring out how to condense more than 80 years of life into the small but thankfully cheerful room she was about to occupy.

It was a difficult process, but when you're under the proverbial gun you do the best you can at the time and hope there's enough time to edit later when they're all settled in and a few objects you thought were simply nice-to-haves turned out to be anything but.

Then, the day came: one which was greeted with fear and trepidation on all sides, fear and trepidation which manifested itself in occasionally unexpected ways. Needless to say, it was a stressful time for all: my grandmother moving on to what she undoubtedly knew would be her final chapter, us making sure everything was as in place as it possibly could, and collectively managing our respective fears for what lay ahead.

The consensus among our family, when all was said and done, was if we had the opportunity to do it again there isn't anything we would necessarily change, but we'd try to avoid it at all costs, such was the stress and emotional toll it took on us all.

But now, particularly in light of COVID-19, I look back on this day with nothing but gratitude, not just the post-mortem laugh Jack Benny sent us, but the fact that we lucked out in the care she received.

She quickly made friends with her new neighbours. It didn't take too long for her to win over the staff, to the extent where one evening a week she had a "girls' night" with one of the staff members where they would munch cashews while watching "The Bachelor" and "The Bachelorette". And when the time came for end-of-life care, they were on hand to make the transition as easy as possible.

The trials faced by long-term care in recent years, particularly over the last 16 months of the global pandemic, have only magnified to us the gratitude we should feel, but also question how we would have handled the situation if our loved one was in long-term care during this time of extreme challenge.

Or, in the words of advocacy organization CanAge, following the Auditor General's report into long-term care, a time of "horror."

"This report is heartbreaking," said CanAge's Laura Tamblyn Watts. "It painstakingly details residents abandoned by the government and health care system, the unnecessary loss of thousands of residents' lives and staff left without basic PPE protections using garbage bags as IPAC (Infection Prevention and Control). It is the story of a government's failures to protect our most vulnerable. Of administrative finger-pointing and an abandonment of a desperate long-term care sector. This is both a call to action and a horror. It is not, however, a surprise.

"Between the Auditor General's findings and now this final report from the Province's own independent commission into long-term care, it's certainly been an eye-opening week for Ontario's Ministry of Long-Term Care. I wish we could say we were shocked by the findings, but they simply pour more fuel on the fire of what we've been saying all along: this is a severely broken senior's care system, and it has to change now."

With my grandparents, we saw both sides of the coin: a thankfully temporary stay long-term care home for my paternal grandfather that was chronically under-staffed, and my maternal grandmother in a residence that went the extra mile to make her last chapter a positive experience.

But we had our experiences in a very different time.

The thought of the women and men who did their utmost to become a part of my grandmother's life, rather than nurses and caregivers simply moving from patient to patient, forced to use garbage bags to protect themselves in literal life-or-death situations, sure in their commitment to the men and women under their care is heartbreaking.

As it has been since we first heard of these problems 16 long months ago and, in some terrible instances, years before COVID made its first appearance on our horizon.

To see it laid out independently, in black and white, and in no uncertain terms, is not only heartbreaking but sobering.

It will now be telling to see what comes from it, from the concrete recommendations in its pages, to our collective resolve to never let this happen again.